

My Mighty Meyer And A New Way to Squeeze

Meyer Lemons have developed a mystique in the culinary world of late. And quite frankly, it's a status that somewhat mystifies me. These are common, very common, extremely common, nearly weedy backyard fruit trees in California. They are about as common as the dandelions to be found in your average expanse of suburban lawn. Home gardeners take them for granted here. But common doesn't mean that they are undesirable (like those dandelions), they're just something of a commodity and generally under appreciated.

Like my little tree. If you read my Harvest Monday posts you might have noticed that there aren't any reports of Meyer lemons. Yup, I don't keep track of my Meyer harvests. I take those lemons completely for granted. They are just there waiting to be picked at a moment's notice all year round. They are as ready to hand as salt and pepper.

The tree was here when I moved in 6 years ago but quite frankly it looked horrible and I had my doubts about it. There had been an unusually hard freeze here just weeks before and the poor tree was terribly frost bitten. There were no lemons to be harvested for that entire year and the next year produced a scanty crop as well. I almost thought that I was going to have to plant a new one. Yes, I may take my Meyer Lemon tree for granted, but I can't be without one. I never did get around to replacing the poor little thing and fast forward a few years and look at the tree now.



There is a proverbial embarrassment of riches. This tree more than just recovered from that freeze, it has flourished. It may be hard to believe, but I am constantly picking lemons off of this tree and it doesn't seem to be making a dent.

Here's a side view.



And a view of the back where it has grown over the wall and is starting to envelope my old, rickety, practically unused potting bench.



The view of the other side of the tree. Notice the hummer feeder, I think that it is partly responsible for the proliferation of lemons. The hummers not only slurp up the nectar from the feeder (when they haven't sucked it dry), they also love to feed on the nectar from the lemon blossoms. I do believe the hummers are pollinating an extraordinary number of lemons. Most of the lemons have quite a few seeds.



This is an especially large cluster of lemons, but not unusual this year.



I don't give this tree any particular special care. This year I didn't even get around to covering it up when we had the threat of freezing overnight temperatures. A few tender new shoots got frost nipped but the

rest of the tree and the developing fruit escaped damage. It's not on a regular feeding schedule. I toss some granulated poultry poop fertilizer around the base of the tree at least once a year, along with some compost and make sure it gets watered regularly during our dry season. It gets a bit of a trim now and then when branches reach too low or too far or get too infested with scale. It generally gets a scale infestation every year but little birds such as Tits and Goldfinches eventually discover the scale and feast on them until the infestation is practically gone.

The only other pest that causes any real problems are rats. Rats have discovered how delicious Meyer lemon peels are. I have often found lemons hanging in the tree that have been stripped right down to the juicy core, not just the zest is consumed but the white pith as well, the lemons get stripped right down to the membrane that encloses the juicy segments. Unlike "regular" lemons, the white pith of Meyer lemons is not bitter, it's really quite tasty, and the rats know it. The local wood rats also like to trim off small branches to take back to their nests. And a couple of years ago when the local rat population exploded and they were eating everything remotely edible in the garden (or under the hood of my car) they were stripping the bark from the branches of the tree. Fortunately, the rat population is back to normal levels and the destruction has dramatically decreased.

This tree also happens to be growing on the north side of the house (2 stories) where it gets almost no sun in the dead of winter. Even in the summer it doesn't get sun until midday. Yet it grows like a weed. No wonder they are such common backyard trees. They are easy to grow and produce like crazy. So why are they just now achieving culinary stardom? My guess is that they have finally been discovered by the food *profession*. They are escaping the confines of the backyard garden and the purview of the average home cook. I knew when I saw bags of Meyer lemons for sale at Costco that this lemon had finally hit the bigtime.

I am always on the lookout for new ways to use the bounty of lemons and I've recently found one new way to use them that I'm rather taken with. Charred. I first read about this method from a [Tasting Table](#) article. It's a really easy way to jazz up lemon juice and lots of fun to experiment with.

Start with a fresh lemon (it doesn't have to be a Meyer) and slice it in half. I like to pluck out any visible seeds because it is quite unpleasant to crunch into a bitter lemon seed.



Heat a ridged griddle or grill pan or just a regular pan - medium heat works well. I brush my lemons with a bit of olive oil, it isn't necessary but does help to prevent sticking. Plop them cut side down onto the griddle and cook for about 5 minutes.



Listen to them sizzle. Smell the aroma... mmm.



Use tongs to remove them from the griddle.



Be sure to let them cool just a bit before trying to squeeze them, unless you have asbestos fingers.



Squeeze the juice onto -

- Grilled asparagus - why heat the griddle just for lemons - toss some asparagus spears with olive oil and grill them for a few minutes on each side until done to your taste. Arrange on a platter and season with salt and pepper, perhaps some chopped fresh tarragon or parsley or chervil or any other herb you like. Drizzle with some really good olive oil (one cannot have too much olive oil in my opinion). Squeeze charred lemon juice over all. You may never steam asparagus again.
- Grilled romaine lettuce - yup, lettuce. First make sure your lettuce is nice and crisp - soak a heart of romaine lettuce in some ice water for 15 minutes or so and then drain well. Cut the head in half lengthwise and place cut side down on a towel to remove any excess remaining water. Drizzle some olive oil over the cut side, place on the griddle cut side down and grill until a bit charred and a bit

wilted on the cut side, don't let the whole head wilt, you want a mix of wilted and crisp lettuce. Place cut side up on a serving plate, season with salt, pepper, and grilled lemon juice and grate some parmigiano cheese over all. Serve immediately. Oh yum - that was for dinner last night.

- If you like lemon juice on fish try charred lemon juice instead.
- How about oysters on the half shell with charred lemon juice.
- Fresh cracked crab meat with charred lemon juice.
- Use it in salad dressing.
- Squeeze it on steamed artichokes.
- Sauteed chard is delicious with a squeeze of charred lemon juice.
- I'm going to try it on grilled whole fava beans when I start harvesting those.